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Chair Cathy Osten, Chair Toni Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Joey Listro and I am the Executive Director for New Britain ROOTS, a non-profit that supports access to locally grown food in New Britain. I also have the honor of serving as a member of the New Britain Board of Education. I strongly support HB6659 and appropriations for school meals.

I support this legislation because I recognize the responsibility our state must embrace in making sure every child is fed. Ensuring our communities are hunger free must always start with our children. All students have the right to nutritious, culturally appropriate food that enables them to attain their full potential. Unfortunately, for many communities in our state, this is simply not the reality.

The pandemic and inflation have increased the vulnerability of children to food insecurity. Childhood hunger continues to be a longstanding issue in Connecticut. Many food security advocates talk about how we can increase access to food as a way to reduce hunger, which is a problem affecting 1 in 8 children in our state. Free School Meals will help families and students facing food insecurity by providing access to nutritious food in a space students spend 180 days of the year in, their school cafeteria. This is a smart approach to increasing food access and this will reduce the burden our low to moderate-income families face in trying to keep their children fed.

Lunch can be a challenging time of day for students. They face a negative stigma associated with not having money to buy food. Those that do not purchase lunch can go hungry for the day which has consequences for their learning in the classroom. This is especially important for high school students, many of which start their school day at 7:30 in the morning without having breakfast at home.

I'm also advocating for Free School Meals to be implemented with a local farm-to-school component to ensure we address the quality and experience students have in their cafeterias. We can accomplish a number of goals by investing a portion of funds to encourage schools to make direct purchases from Connecticut farmers. First, we will be supporting our state economy as local producers are more likely to purchase supplies and employ people living in their communities. Second, when school meals feature local ingredients, the quality and nutritional value also increase as will participation. Third, creating a shorter supply chain will help schools reduce disruptions in school meal operations, something that was a common occurrence during the pandemic.

I urge you to pass legislation to help ensure no kid goes hungry while in school. Thank you.